DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 096 JC 920 392

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TITLE A Freshman Retention Project at Borough of Manhattan Community College.
PUB DATE 7 Oct 91
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the University of South Carolina Conference, "The Minority Student Today: Recruitment, Retention, and Success" (San Antonio, TX, October 6-9, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Advising; Academic Persistence; *College Freshmen; Community Colleges; *Compensatory Education; *Curriculum Development; *Faculty Development; *Minority Groups; School Holding Power; School Orientation; Summer Programs; Teaching Assistants; Tutors; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *City University of New York Manhattan Comm Coll

ABSTRACT

At Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in New York, the student body is 55% Black, 29% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 9% White and other ethnic groups. Placement testing indicates that 70% of entering freshmen require some form of remediation. As part of BMCC's efforts to improve first-year retention rates, students requiring remediation have the option of enrolling in a free, 6-week intensive remedial summer session. In addition, all first-year students enroll in a year-long freshman orientation course taught by a member of the counseling staff. In the 1989-90 academic year, BMCC initiated the Freshman Year Project (FYP), appointing a five-member committee which focused its efforts on advisement/counseling, curricular reform, and faculty development. Beginning in fall 1990, 10 full-time faculty members conducted orientations in small intensive sessions which met throughout the semester for a pilot group of 20 entering freshmen. In 1991, 50 full-time faculty members participated in the orientation. As a curriculum initiative, the FYP identified four courses with high attrition rates, reduced class size to 20 students, and introduced teaching assistants who also served as out-of-class tutors. By spring 1991, the initiative included 18 course sections. In addition, paired and blocked course sequences were introduced. In the area of faculty development, a group of 12 semester-long seminars was developed and overseen by the FYP committee; among the seminars were "New Paradigms, Old Paradigms: How Students Learn," "What We Know about Our Students," "Sexism in the Classroom," "Black English Workshop," and "Learning with Video." (PAA)

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A FRESHMAN RETENTION PROJECT AT BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

presented by

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Joyce Harte, Chairperson, Freshman Year Project Committee

The Minority Student Today Conference
San Antonio, Texas
October 7, 1991

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INTRODUCTION
(Dr. Curtis)

Good Afternoon. My name is Stephen Curtis. I'm Dean of Academic Affairs at Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City. My colleague is Joyce Harte, Deputy Chairperson of the Department of English at the College, and Chairperson of our Freshman Year Committee. We want to share with you today some of the issues and activities we've undertaken at BMCC as part of our Freshman Year Project. I'll provide some background on the College and the project, Joyce will talk specifically about the work of our faculty committee, and I shall sum up with some observations on evaluation and future directions.

Institutional Profile. First, let me give you a quick profile of our institution. Borough of Manhattan Community College is a campus of The City University of New York (CUNY). Ours is the largest of The City University community colleges and the only one situated in Manhattan. We are an open admissions institution, and we attract almost 15,000 students in credit programs each semester. In addition to serving students from all five New York City boroughs, we have a foreign student population which currently represents 97 countries. In terms of race and ethnicity, 55% of our student body is Black, 29% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 9% Caucasian and other ethnic groups. Almost two-thirds of our students are women.

In terms of academic preparation, many of our students come to the College lacking a strong academic background. Twenty percent (20%) of entering freshmen hold a GED rather than a high school diploma, and only 38% of entering freshmen have achieved a high school average of 70 or better. As part of The City University of New York, our College participates in a mandatory Freshman Skills Assessment Program. All entering students are assessed in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics. The results of those assessments indicate that 70% of our students are placed into one or more remedial classes, and our faculty have developed well-defined sequences of courses in reading, writing, mathematics and English as a Second Language. One of the educational issues with which our faculty wrestle, then, is how to reinforce the basic skills needs of our students across disciplines.

Another issue is how to facilitate the transition to college. Fifty-one percent (51%) of our student body are part-time. Twenty-eight percent (28%) are supporting children. Sixty-eight percent (68%) are receiving full-time or part-time financial aid. Because we serve the entire metropolitan New York City area, it is not unusual for students to travel 1-2 hours one way to attend school. In short, we are a typical urban institution, whose students have work responsibilities, family obligations--a whole range

of factors that can compete with, distract from, or become a barrier to their academic goals.

For entering students, we have a fairly structured track for them to follow. After admission to the college, students take the mandated assessment of basic skills to which I have already alluded. At that point there is an opportunity for students who are determined to have remedial needs to address those needs prior to enrollment in college.

Pre-Freshman Program. Our college supports an extensive Pre-Freshman Immersion Program--primarily in the summer, but on a smaller scale in the January intersession as well--which offers freshmen an opportunity to take some of their required remedial classes free, in advance of their actual enrollment in the College. The Pre-Freshman Program has been a University-wide initiative, though our particular campus has developed by far the largest such program in the University. The program is offered in an intensive 6-week summer session, and its components include: small class size (15); a teaching assistant (tutor) in every class; a counseling/ orientation component that is integrated with instruction; a theme approach across the curriculum; student incentives, including books, snacks and transportation; and a sense of community that is otherwise difficult to foster in a commuter college like ours.

Our Pre-Freshman Summer Program has grown from 70 students in 1987 to over 1500 this past summer. Over 95% of the participants complete the program; and our data show that program participants are retained after three semesters at a 20% higher rate than non-participants. In addition, the overall retention rate within our institution is on the increase--as much as 6% by the end of the third semester of enrollment in our study of freshman cohorts.

Basic Skills Prerequisites. Another way in which the academic needs of our students have been approached is through our basic skills prerequisites. Every course offered in our college has defined reading, writing and (when appropriate) mathematics levels that faculty have established as the minimum required for student success in the course. A history course, for example, has defined reading and writing levels which serve as prerequisites to enrollment, but no mathematics level. Economics, on the other hand, has all three. The basic skills levels are defined in terms of the Freshman Skills Assessment Program I cited earlier. Our computerized advisement/registration system reads the student's assessment scores and either permits or prohibits registration in a given course, depending upon whether the student meets the basic skills prerequisites for that course. That is true for Nursing courses, Science, Math and the like. In addition to being programed into the computer, these prerequisites are also published in a Basic Skills Guide.

The establishment of these prerequisites has been one step toward ensuring that students are entering classes for which they are prepared.

Orientation. One other facet I'll mention here is the counseling component for freshmen. We have had a traditional Freshman Convocation prior to classes, which served in the past as a point of welcome to the students. All incoming freshmen, as part of their first semester schedule, are also required to take a one-credit orientation course, entitled Academic Life and Skills. The course is taught by a member of the counseling faculty, who also serves as the assigned counselor for the student throughout his/her tenure.

Freshman Year Project. The Pre-Freshman effort at our College has been a campus priority. The next logical step for us and for our University was to focus on the Freshman Year itself. For the 1989-90 academic year, the University sought and received a special allocation of monies from the State of New York, the purpose for which would be to develop model programs at three CUNY campuses--two senior colleges and one community College (BMCC). The specific goal of the project was to improve retention among freshman students--a significant goal, considering the typical attrition rate in a given freshman class.

On our campus we approached the project by naming a faculty committee, chaired by Joyce Harte. Though a relatively small committee (five members), it brought together representatives of basic skills and content disciplines, career and liberal arts departments, teaching and counseling faculty. The committee's initial charge was to examine a number of freshman-centered models, to develop an overall plan for addressing the needs of freshmen at BMCC, and to assist in the implementation of specific activities.

As the committee developed recommendations, it sought to build on a number of objectives derived from the College's long-range planning process. These include the need for linkages between basic skills and content courses; the development of critical thinking skills among our students; the role of faculty development in addressing diverse student learning styles; and the desire to build learning communities inside and outside the classroom. The results of the committee's work to date falls into three general areas: advisement/counseling; curricular reform; and faculty development. At this point I'll turn to Joyce, who will trace for you the committee's activities and some of the specific initiatives we've undertaken.

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FRESHMAN YEAR COMMITTEE
(Professor Harte)

The five members who comprise the Freshman Year Committee began our task by establishing goals to guide us in our initiatives. Our ultimate goal was to try to create a nurturing and caring environment for all students, but especially freshmen.

Orientation/Advisement. Our first area of focus was the orientation and advisement process. We felt that orientation could be a smaller experience. We were deeply impressed with BMCC's Pre-Freshman Immersion model, which successfully integrated counseling into instructional contexts. There was a strong sense of community among students, faculty and other support staff. We viewed orientation as the first step toward a similar goal in the Freshman Year. Previously, the College held convocations which called students to the college but didn't connect to them in any meaningful way. They would meet in a large impersonal group in the auditorium where they would be spoken to by the President and various deans of the College. They would then more or less drift away, needless to say, in a fog.

In the Fall of 1990, twenty students were oriented on a pilot basis. Ten full-time faculty conducted orientations in small groups. These faculty served as faculty mentors with this targeted group of freshmen throughout the semester. This effort was expanded in the Spring 1991 semester with fifty full-time faculty participating. Students were first greeted by the President and deans. They were then escorted to various classrooms where they met a faculty member who greeted them. They were asked to form pairs and interview each other, asking questions about student culture and educational goals. Subsequently they came back to the larger group, where each student introduced his/her partner. Faculty members and students then engaged in discussion on the nature and purpose of higher education, the clarification of goals and values. Students were given information about education options, requirements, policies and procedures. Finally, they were given a tour of the campus where key members in various areas were ready to assist with information and answering of questions.

Curricular Initiatives. It is the committee's belief that through linked and blocked classes students develop heightened awareness and ability to use a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving. They also acquire the ability to apply skills from one course to learning in other fields. In addition, through classes conducted around a particular theme, students also enlarge their perspectives, allowing them to think about issues in new ways. The most important function in terms of the freshman year is that of collaboration between faculty in a concerted effort to build a community of learners.

There were three initiatives undertaken in 1990-1991. In the Fall 1990 term, four introductory-level courses were identified

as pilots because of their high attrition rates. Using the Pre-Freshman course format, classes were limited to 20 and teaching assistants worked one period in class, and 4-6 hours outside for tutorial purposes. This curricular effort was an attempt to enhance students' ability to pass freshman-level courses and move forward in departmental sequences. The four faculty met as a group on a bi-weekly basis with the teaching assistants to discuss pedagogy and revise strategies.

This initiative was expanded in Spring 1991 term to include eighteen sections, ten of which again were high attrition courses drawn from business, data processing, and accounting, and eight of which were liberal arts courses commonly required of most freshmen. Faculty were again encouraged to meet in groups along with their teaching assistants for review of strategies and exchange of ideas.

In the Spring 1991 term there was also the implementation of two other curricular initiatives: these were paired classes and blocked classes. One of the committee's goals was to integrate freshman remedial students into content courses through pairing of basic skills and content courses. Basic skills which would ordinarily serve as prerequisites would be offered as corequisites with these content courses. Thus, seven pairs of basic skills classes drawn from ESL, Reading, Writing or Mathematics, were paired with content courses drawn from Business, Sociology, History, English, and Science. As with the capped classes, enrollment was limited to 20 students, teachers coordinated common materials, and, in three classes, teaching assistants were engaged.

One of our aims on the Freshman Year Committee is the creation of an experimental core of freshman students that the college would track during their entire stay at BMCC. Thus, the final strand of the curricular initiative was that of blocked programming for targeted freshmen. The College offered blocked course schedules for freshmen with remedial requirements. Over half of the eight blocks were geared toward ESL students, but, two, for the first time, included both basic skills (as corequisites) and content courses. The block programming included Reading, Speech, Health and Freshman Orientation courses. This was a 12-hour, full-time program. Peer counselors were assigned to two of the blocks as requested by the committee.

Faculty Development. There were several orientation and training sessions held for faculty who participated in the freshman project. For the 50 faculty who participated in the Spring Freshman Convocation/Orientation, two training sessions were held. The purpose was to a) acquaint faculty with the goals of the Freshman Year Project and b) to review the common agenda that had been developed for the small-group sessions. In addition, the faculty who were in the curricular initiatives, i.e., pairs, etc., were also involved in several preparatory activities: there was a December orientation meeting, which

acquainted them with the Freshman year Project and introduced them to their partners and team members; further, they participated in a January workshop led by the College's Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum committee. In the latter they were offered hands-on methods for integrating basic skills and content courses.

Perhaps the largest faculty development effort was a semester-long seminar proposed and overseen by the Freshman Year Committee. These seminars were designed to examine both content and teaching methods in an attempt to bridge the gap between our traditional training and the nontraditional needs and interests of our students. The seminars were conceived as a forum to explore the diversity of our students' multicultural backgrounds and learning needs, and to create a community of learners among faculty participants and, ultimately, our students. Speakers were invited to present on various topics of their expertise and in so doing involve faculty participants in the process of learning through small group discussion, writing, and other interactive dynamics. It is expected that participants will modify the syllabus of at least one course for Fall 1991. Further, participants will be asked to meet with the committee to review the changes they have made.

In order to gain faculty recruits, the committee visited various departments in the College and sent out applications. As we reviewed the applications, our attempt was to ensure diversity among the participants with respect to department, gender and ethnic background. We also held a meeting with participants in December, 1990. Participants introduced themselves, and the expectations and goals of series of seminars were discussed.

One of the things the committee strongly felt was that attitude change must precede any change in methodology. We resisted the temptation to present a smorgasbord of" tricks" for faculty to try out on a Monday.

Content of Seminars. The content of the seminars dealt with changing paradigms to some methodology. I will summarize four of them:

Session 1: "New Paradigms, Old Paradigms: How Students Learn"

Multicultural diversity is positive and valuable in both academia and life. Challenging oppressions is an ongoing process, and in order to eliminate prejudice, change attitudes, and reconsider curriculum, it is necessary first to experience personal change.

The objectives of faculty should be to develop skills for dealing with the "isms" inherent in the class and curriculum. We need to look at how these "isms" affect attitude and behavior in both ourselves and our students. We need to integrate diversity in the class and curriculum, to develop awareness and pedagogy for serving new and diverse populations.

Several problems exist with regard to traditional process and content for minority students: academia creates a "sink or swim" environment alien to students; content and pedagogic style may be highly Anglocentric; faculty assume students have similar needs and learning styles; curriculum does not reflect minority interests or experiences; pluralistic content is often "added on" rather than integrated.

Faculty need to examine their "old" paradigms of learning and "right" ways of teaching in order to gain new perspectives on content and teaching. We need to recognize how to divest and share "knowledge as power" with our students. Faculty should examine what strengths, despite our differences, we can bring to our students and our teaching.

Session 2: "What We Know About Our Students"

Looking at ourselves as learners provides the opportunity to clarify our perceptions and use ourselves as resources. We need to look at our assumptions about our students by considering these questions:

--What do you know for sure about your students?
--What do you suspect about your students?
--What evidence do you have for what you know?
--What evidence do you have for what you suspect?
--What other information do you want or need to know about your students?

Discussion of our written responses served to elucidate our assumptions and expectations, as well as perceived strengths and weaknesses of our students.

Further discussion centered on ways to create a "safe" learning environment for students in which resistances to learning are reduced; to promote active participation in learning; to be more flexible and adaptive in our teaching styles.

This session combined both journal and freewriting, as well as questions posed by Prof. Ortiz, the workshop leader, for discussion among the participants.

Session 8: "Sexism in the Classroom" & "Making Connections between the Student's Culture and the Classroom"

The first part of this session focused on sexism in pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation. Women, Prof. Maglin (the workshop leader) noted, often find it difficult to establish credibility and recognition. The values, attitudes, beliefs as well as the sexual orientation of the teacher are often carried into the classroom in the form of bias against male or female students.

Further, Maglin presented information that "female ways of knowing" influence the performance of women students, and their evaluation by male faculty. For example, women prefer to cite personal experiences; use "I" more readily in their writings; invite more interactive discussion; and may be somewhat hesitant to confront opposition and less direct in expressing disagreement.

Faculty need to provide assignments that do not institutionalize heterosexuality and traditional assumptions of gender, age, and sexual orientation. She encouraged faculty to reconsider pedagogy, content, and writing topics which may reinforce traditional attitudes and biases.

Session 10: "Black English Workshop" & "Language and Ethnic Identity"

The seminar began with a consideration of the effects of one's accent or dialect on the perception of others. Participants were involved in exploring what they "hear" in Black English. Responses included differences in pronunciation, leaving off the "s" of plural nouns, use of double negatives, slang, etc.

I would like to end this presentation by citing two of the faculty comments to their experience in the seminars:

> All in all, the seminar succeeded, perhaps too well, in making me feel like a student. This point, just maybe, was subjected to overkill. But the lesson learned cannot be forgotten. How else can one understand our students--and most especially that most vulnerable of all students--the first-year freshman--unless one is placed, literally in their shoes?

and

> If I take a serious look at the impact of the seminars on both my professional and personal levels, changes have ranged from subtle to quite noticeable. Moreso than at any other point in my teaching career, I have been forced to take a sharper look at the "baggage" which I carry, at the assumptions which I make about students, about my expectations, and about my ability to "break" information down in ways that is relevant to students yet also helps me to fulfill what I feel to be my responsibility as a teacher. I have always been aware that people "learn" in different ways, but the extent to which that learning could be so interpreted through right brain vs. left brain schematic systems was in and of itself enough to make me pause and reflect on my tendency towards a teaching style/technique which is far more authoritarian, far more controlling and less flexible than I would like to admit to.

These comments are obviously the reactions that we hoped for from all participants; and as we continue in our efforts, we hope

to expand on these initiatives. In addition, we hope to complete a study of basic skills assessment practice at BMCC and recommend a pilot assessment program. We are investigating the creation of a Freshman Center which can serve as a center for faculty mentoring, tutorial referrals and peer counseling activities.

We hope to institutionalize these various strands in order to make the Freshman Year at BMCC truly a caring and nurturing one.

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CONCLUSION
(Dr. Curtis)

Our Freshman Year Project is an evolving one. We already had in place a number of steps that we felt have helped retain students and have helped students to achieve academically. We are trying to extend those steps--in some cases utilizing components of our Pre-Freshman model in our regular academic year, in other cases modifying our current practice to reflect more student-oriented goals. As we continue with our Freshman Project, we want to take what seems to work in our context and institutionalize it across the campus.

The Freshman Convocation, for example, has been dramatically changed, so that it fits into an overall advisement/counseling process. It has been a change for the better, and we've been able to move from a pilot of 10 faculty to 50 last spring and 100 this fall. Written evaluations of all sessions from both faculty and students have affirmed that this approach had a positive impact on the students' introduction to and assimilation at BMCC.

In the area of curriculum, Joyce has described three initiatives which were undertaken in 1990-91. In the Fall 1990 term, four introductory-level courses were identified for a pilot format, utilizing both smaller class size as well as a teaching assistant. The four courses--drawn from Accounting, Business and Data Processing--were selected because they are among the most difficult in the College, as demonstrated by their high attrition rates. Subsequent grade analysis indicated that in three of the four sections attrition was substantially lower and student success (defined as the pass rate) substantially higher than the average for all sections of the respective courses.

The Spring 1991 term saw the implementation of two other curricular efforts: paired classes and blocked classes. Seven pairs were taught during that semester, each involving a skills class (ESL, Reading or Mathematics) and a content course. (While more than seven pairs were initially scheduled, enrollment patterns indicated less student interest than anticipated in business/basic skills

combinations.) Subsequent exit interviews of participating faculty, combined with initial grade analysis, have led to the recommendation that paired courses be continued, but in some instances without waiving the prerequisite policy.

With regard to blocked classes, over half of the eight blocks in Spring 1991 were geared toward ESL students, but two--for the first time--included both basic skills (as corequisites) and content courses. Participating faculty have recommended that the corequisite approach be continued in this context. In those blocks that included content courses, enrollment in those courses seems to have benefitted the basic skills classes; for each reading course saw greater success than in parallel sections of the same level. Altogether 750 freshmen were enrolled in the three curricular initiatives.

The final area of activity was faculty development. In this area the committee put much of its effort for the 1990-91 year. Many orientation and training sessions were held for faculty who participated in the project. The largest faculty development effort was the semester-long seminar. This component has been heavily evaluated through 1) the presence at all seminar sessions of a non-participating faculty member who served as external observer; 2) a written questionnaire distributed and collected by the seminar coordinators; and 3) exit interviews conducted by the BMCC Office of Institutional Research with randomly selected participants. The evaluations indicate that participants found the seminar to be an excellent vehicle for sharing common problems, concerns, and techniques. Many faculty found this aspect of the seminar to be unique at the College, since similar forums for faculty are rare. The seminar also inspired a sense of group spirit and satisfaction in getting to know faculty in other disciplines. Overall, participants wanted more time to discuss the speakers, evaluate the readings and work together as a community of teachers.

With the start of the Fall 1991 term, the Freshman Year Committee will continue its work in the three cited areas, though expanding activities in each. In addition, the committee will complete a study of current basic skills assessment practice at BMCC and recommend a pilot assessment program, to be implemented in Spring 1992; investigate the creation of a Freshman Center, which can serve as the focal point for faculty mentoring activities, tutorial referrals, and peer counseling activities; and finalize suggested revisions to the College's required freshman orientation course. Finally, it is the committee's goal this year to seek ways to institutionalize those efforts which, after evaluation, are found to be successful in meeting project goals.

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FRESHMAN YEAR PROJECT COMPONENTS

Advisement/Counseling
- Freshman Convocation

Curriculum
- Paired Courses
- Blocked Courses
- Capped Courses

Faculty Development
- Orientation Training
- Reading/Writing Across the Curriculum Workshops
- Freshman Year Seminar
  1. New Paradigms, Old Paradigms: How Students Learn
  2. What We Know About Our Students
  3. Recognizing the Demands of Reading
  4. Observing Ourselves as Listeners
  5. Making Subject Matter Accessible
  6. Focus and Vision
  7. Writing to Learn
  8. Sexism in the Classroom
  9. Writing to Learn: Semantic Mapping and Webbing
  10. Black English Workshop
  11. Learning with Video
  12. A Community of Learners

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